The Experience of Live and Recorded Music: A Cello Solo

Sarah Hunter
sahunte@bgsu.edu

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The Experience of Live and Recorded Music: A Cello Solo

Ashlin Hunter

Dr. Christopher Dietz and Dr. Brian Snow, Advisors

College of Musical Arts
Introduction

Americans experience 98.5% of their music in a recorded medium such as radio, online streaming, TV, CDs, or other physical mediums.\(^1\) As a composer of classical concert music, I challenged myself to compose music that offered audiences a meaningful experience as a live performance and as a recorded piece of music.

The history of music is intertwined with the history of musical performance. Audio recording technology was not developed until the late nineteenth century, and until the popularization of physical musical recordings, people experienced music as only a performative art. With the development of long-play records, cassettes, and CDs, our experience with music transformed; we could now listen to music outside of concert halls and performance venues.\(^2\)

Recording technology began a new divergence of classical music and popular music. Fans of popular music artists await the release of new albums: there is excitement and anticipation surrounding new recorded music. However, classical music fans buy tickets to hear the premiere of a new symphony or piece of chamber music by their favorite composer. For classical music lovers, the joy is in hearing live performance. With my Honors Project, I wrote a piece of music that fulfills expectations as a meaningful live performance and as a valuable recorded experience.

The Music

The piece I composed for this project is titled *heirlooms*, a nine-minute composition for cello and electronics. From the beginning stages of this project, I wanted to write a piece that was inspired by memory, friendship, and growth. These inspirations served as the basis from which I made artistic and creative decisions about the music, the live performance, and the recording. I

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\(^1\) *Share of Ear: Americans’ Share of Time Spent Listening to Audio Sources* (Edison Research, 2014).

chose to write for a solo instrument because having a single instrumentalist on the stage allows for a greater potential that the audience members will feel a personal connection to the music. If I had written for a string quartet, for example, there would have been four musicians on the stage. A single musician performing is a more vulnerable and intimate experience.

In addition to how many performers I wanted to include, I carefully considered the instrumentation of the piece. The cello is a visually captivating instrument. The piece is about friendship, and the way a cellist holds the instrument—nestled near the body—lends itself to thoughts of closeness. Furthermore, the frequency range of the cello is similar to that of the human voice, which makes it sound familiar and natural. However, the primary factor for choosing to write for cello was that I could write the piece in collaboration with a childhood friend, Matt Magerkurth, an excellent cellist.

Because I know Matt and have seen him perform on many concerts, I would better be able to craft the live performance. As I composed the piece, I personalized the music for him. Matt is both a classically-trained cellist and a phenomenal improviser. The score\(^3\) is a combination of specific, written-out musical material and poetic, open-ended improvisational instructions. This allowed Matt to embody the piece. This embodiment affected his performance; audience members reflected that Matt’s performance “drew you in”\(^4\) and “seeing his face while he was playing exuded a sense of joy and brightness.”\(^5\)

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\(^3\) Appendix 1: *heirlooms* Score

\(^4\) Andrew Smith, interview with the author, 2 April 2018.

\(^5\) Meghan Cullen, interview with the author, 28 March 2018.
The Live Performance

The piece, *heirlooms*, was performed live on my degree recital on March 24, 2018 in the Conrad Choral Room in the Wolfe Center for the Performing Arts. Because I had previously attended concerts in the Conrad Room, I was familiar with the acoustics and layout of the performance space. This knowledge affected the musical and artistic decisions for the live performance of *heirlooms*. In order to create a sense of intimacy with the performance, I chose to have the piece performed in darkness. The only source of light was from a desk lamp which was placed on a small table next to the cellist (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Matt Magerkurth performing heirlooms in the Conrad Choral Room (March 24, 2018)](image)

This staging decision provided audience members with a sense of familiarity and friendship despite having no personal connection to the performer. In a discussion with music student Meghan
Cullen after the performance, she noted that the lighting “provided anonymity and intimacy.” She said that because her emotional reactions could not be seen by other people, she felt more immersed in the observation—because the darkness separated her from fellow audience members, it felt more personal; she could focus on the connection between her and the cellist. Another audience member, Andrew Smith, said that the lamp “helped frame [the music] as something very intimate and something that was meant to be an expression of a personal relationship. [The lighting] helped hone in on a kind of warmth and sincerity.”

In addition to serving an artistic purpose, the lighting decision was also one of necessity. Because the instrument was being amplified through two microphones, the use of darkness and the lamp hid the microphones, which were a visual disturbance to the stage.

Another way I controlled the musical experience was through the recital program booklet. Each audience member received a program booklet that listed the pieces being performed and the program notes for each piece. Because program booklets are the only direct communication composers have with audience members, choosing evocative titles and writing clear and meaningful program notes are essential when crafting the musical experience. I chose the title, *heirlooms*, to convey a sense of age, memory, childhood, and familiarity. These are the program notes for the piece:

You are in a small room with a friend. As you sit across from each other and talk, their voice is familiar—it’s a voice you’ve heard speak thousands of words over many years. The room is comfortable. The walls are the same color they’ve always been; the carpet is soft on your feet; the box on the shelf holds the heirlooms that are physical manifestations of good memories and friendship and family.

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6 Meghan Cullen, interview with the author, 28 March 2018.
7 Andrew Smith, interview with the author, 2 April 2018.
8 Appendix 2: Recital Program
heirlooms was written for my dear friend Matt Magerkurth who I met when we were 15- and 16-years old at a summer composition workshop in Kansas City. This piece would not exist without our friendship. As I wrote this piece, I would pretend I was in that small room with Matt and his cello. This piece is what it felt like in that room.

One audience member reflected that these program notes added a sense of generosity to the performance—that I was “trying to give [them] the music.”

The Recorded Piece

In order to create a valuable experience as a recorded piece of music, I collaborated with videographer Nick Zoulek to create a film for heirlooms. By offering a visual accompaniment to the music, listeners are offered a more meaningful and controlled context in which to experience the piece. The narrative of the film that conveys themes of childhood, memory, and growth. The film begins with a girl admiring childhood heirlooms on a shelf: a teacup, a music box, a key (Figure 2).

She packs a picnic and goes into the woods, taking with her a couple of the heirlooms from the shelf. In the woods, she sees a flower. She picks the flower and buries one of the heirlooms in

Figure 2: A frame from the film—the music box

9 Andrew Smith, interview with the author, 2 April 2018.
its place. She plants each heirloom as if they are seeds, and from each object a flower grows. She collects each of these flowers, and they eventually fill her room. The last scene of the film shows the girl sitting with the final, unplanted heirloom—the music box—amidst a mess of flowers (Figure 3).

Similar to the function of program notes and lighting for the live performance, the film allowed me to control the context in which a listener experiences the music.

Another important factor when distributing recorded music is the quality of the audio. A recording from the live performance would have audience and room noise, so I held a recording session to create a high-quality and controlled recording. For the studio recording, I worked with recording artist Stephen Hennessey. We used five microphones to record the piece (Figure 4). By using varied microphones with specific spatial orientations, we were able to create a recording that sounds clear and natural.
Unlike live performances, I cannot control when or where a person will experience the piece or how they are listening to the music (with headphones, through phone speakers, etc.); however, by providing high-quality audio and offering a visual experience, listeners are more likely to be immersed in the piece and connect to the music.

Conclusion and Reflection

Although the music remained the same for the live performance and the recorded piece, I used the proclivities of each medium to craft two different artistic experiences. Both experiences retained the themes of friendship, memory, and intimacy that I planned from the beginning stages of the project, but they differed in the way this goal was achieved. With the live performance, the intimacy was created through the lighting and program notes. For the recorded version, the

Figure 4: Recording heirlooms
connection was made through the recording techniques and the visual accompaniment of the film collaboration.

While I had never composed music intended for a recording until this project, many of my interests in writing concert music translated well to the recorded piece. As a composer, I am interested in the live music experience; I think beyond the notes and harmonies and consider what it feels like to sit in a concert hall and hear my music. Through this project, I created a piece of music that is intended for people to experience as part of a group—as an audience member—and alone with headphones or through their phone or laptop.

A video comparing the live performance and the short film versions can be viewed at this web address: https://youtu.be/cMjNxxMJyzY. The video showcases the first few minutes of the live performance, the recorded audio without film, and the short film with audio.
heirlooms
for singing cellist and fixed media
Ashlin Hunter
Performance notes:

Each unmetered line is approximately 30 seconds.

For harmonic pizzicato: “nut,” “bridge,” and “center” indicate which node should be used to create the written pitch

+ = L. H. pizzicato

ovp. = overpressure

s. p. = sul ponticello
heirlooms
for Matt
Ashlin Hunter

Delicate and patient
remember friendship  blue (the color of distance)

Voice

Cello

Electronics

with lightness

Voice

Cello

Elec.

0:00

0:30
repeat phrase three times (vary nodes, order, and durations):
1) with blue longing
2) with rememberance of blooming peonies
3) lost in memory

as if tracing constellations on the strings
pizz.
rit.

repeat phrase five times (preserve order):
1) for the end of things
2) a whispering
3) a lullaby

any word, syllable, or sound
arco or pizz.
4) colorful like a Paul Jenkins painting

5) as if beginning

pick up music box and begin turning the crank (not amplified by cello)

rest music box on to cello to amplify
Appendix 2: Recital Program

The College of Musical Arts presents

ASHLIN HUNTER

COMPOSITION

from the studio of Dr. Christopher Dietz

Saturday, March 24, 2018
8:00 p.m.
Conrad Room
Wolfe Center for the Performing Arts

This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
BACHELOR OF MUSIC IN MUSIC COMPOSITION
PROGRAM

Turnsole (2017) .......................................... Ashlin Hunter
1. Prelude
4. Allemande
5. Pavane
6. In Darkness
7. Duet

Hannah Stroth, soprano
Natalie Magaña, flute
Jack Smolenski, bassoon
Gramm Drennen, cello
Emily Morin, piano
Yabetza Vivas-Irizarry, conductor

cross-stitchings (2016)

Jessica Pollack, clarinet
Ariel Magno da Costa, piano

you & I (2017)

Hannah Stroth and Alissa Plenzler, soprano
Hayley Hoss and Ali Hegedus, alto
Avery Gerwin and Brock Burkett, tenor
Abraham Roos and Aaron Roos, bass
Adam O’Dell, conductor

“you & I”
by Ashlin Hunter

you & I
build a pearly web over the space between us to
spin silks over paths traveled
to fill the shapes with an iridescent soapy film on
which we project the sky
the impossible
Blue
Cotton the Color of Distance and Old Memories (2017)
Natalie Magaña, flute
Caleb Burkhardt, saxophone

heirlooms for singing cellist and fixed media (2018)
Matthew Magerkurth, cello

lightfastness: Field with Irises near Arles (2018)
Natalie Magaña, flutes; Jessica Pollack, clarinet; Caleb Burkhardt, saxophone; Jack Smolenski, bassoon
Enrico Solito, trumpet; Curtis Biggs, trombone
Nicholas Rossler, guitar; Sophia Jarrell and Ben Silberman, violin;
Kathryn Kibbe, viola
Gramm Drennen, cello; Jason Handron, string bass
Yabetza Vivas-Irizarry, conductor
Turnsole

Each year, two student composers are selected to write short chamber operas as a part of BGSU’s MicroOpera project. Last year, I had the pleasure of working with fellow students to bring my first staged work to life. “Turnsole” is a narrative of obsession: at dawn, a girl admires the Sun’s light and warmth (Scene 1). She sings to the Sun, but he can only give affection and love to the flowers (Scene 2-3). As sunset approaches, the girl wonders what makes the flowers worthy to receive the Sun’s attention, eventually resolving to plant herself in the earth in order to become a flower (Scene 4). As night falls, the girl’s transformation begins (Scene 6). With the sunrise, the girl is finally united with the Sun (Scene 7). Tonight’s concert presents excerpts from “Turnsole.”

Program Note:
“The term turnsole refers to a plant which is said always to follow the path of the sun across the sky—a sunflower. Generally, all plants exhibit a violent longing for light. When kept in the shade, they twist and turn and stretch their leaf-stalks beyond all expectations in order to catch some rays of the sun. In olden days this curious habit of theirs was attributed to an occult sympathy between flowers and sunlight. This affection between plants and the great luminary gives them life and beauty and the power of unceasing regeneration. As one approaches a blooming meadow from the east, he will see not a single blossom on the green carpet, but all the tiny, bright cups and clusters looking steadfastly toward the west. All flowers follow with loving devotion the brightness of its light, gazing at the sun, and turning towards it from sunrise to sunset.”
adapted from Appletons' Journal of Literature, Science, and Art: Volume V, No. 111 (May 13, 1871)

cross-stitchings

In many ways, “cross-stitchings” exists like jagged quilt squares: repetition, deviation, the fabric is bunched up in places, but all the material is held together by a single thread. In this case, the single thread is a chord progression that is presented in its most pure form at the end of the piece. Although the form of “cross-stitchings” is quite simple—a cycling bass line is woven between shifting piano textures and arpeggiated clarinet lines—the music is driven forward by the changing pulse and constant play between musicians.
you & I

When I decided to come to Ohio for school, I could not have anticipated how much the distance between here and home would challenge me. Being a thousand miles away from my family and closest friends became a palpable emptiness that I often pictured as a geographic expanse between my heart and theirs. I wrote this poem as a way to reimagine my homesickness—to fill the distance with beautiful things that connected us. When I decided transform this poem into a piece for choir, I wanted the voices to build a bridge of shiny, colorful, ever-shifting objects of music between moments of palpable silence.

Cotton the Color of Distance and Old Memories

Have you ever noticed that the world is blue at its edges? Have you ever seen mountains or a skyline on the horizon and wondered why they look half faded into the sky?

Blue is the color of things that are far away.

What if old photographs and memories started turning blue—not because they’re far away in geography, but in time—so that the cotton blanket that you slept with every night when you were five has started to turn blue in your memory.

“Cotton the Color of Distance and Old Memories” is a lullaby that’s been distorted through time. It’s been tinted and smeared because it’s something you heard as a child.
heirlooms

You are in a small room with a friend. As you sit across from each other and talk, their voice is familiar—it’s a voice you’ve heard speak thousands of words over many years. The room is comfortable. The walls are the same color they’ve always been; the carpet is soft on your feet; the box on the shelf holds the heirlooms that are physical manifestations of good memories and friendship and family.

“heirlooms” was written for my dear friend Matt Magerkurth who I met when we were 15- and 16-years old at a summer composition workshop in Kansas City. This piece would not exist without our friendship. As I wrote this piece, I would pretend I was in that small room with Matt and his cello. This piece is what it felt like in that room.

lightfastness: Field with Irises near Arles

If you open any of my large, hard-backed books and flip through the pages, you will find pressed leaves and dried flowers nestled between the pages. I love trying to preserve these small bits of nature, but after months of being pressed and dried, the autumn leaves and spring flowers lose their vibrant oranges, reds, or greens. Many natural pigments are not lightfast—when exposed to light, they decay. For the same reason, The flowers in Vincent Van Gogh’s Field with irises near Arles have changed color over time. As a result of the red pigments’ vulnerability to light, the once-purple irises are now blue. With “lightfastness,” I created music that changes color over time, much like my collected leaves and Van Gogh’s irises.
Bibliography


Cullen, Meghan. Interview with the author. 28 March 2018.

Smith, Andrew. Interview with the author. 2 April 2018.
